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Sosa's Corked Bat: Much to Do Over Not Much

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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It is so.

It is also Sosa.

Sammy Sosa quickly admitted that his bat was corked and indeed that it was his bat. He then offered an explanation for using the corked bat. Few seem willing to accept Sammy's excuse even though inspection of over eighty of Sosa's bats have shown no other cork enhanced hitting instruments.

As for me, do I believe Sammy? Well, yes and no. I am willing to believe that Sammy has one corked bat available for batting practice. That he picked it up by mistake when he came to the plate seems less likely. My best guess is that Sammy Sosa in frustration over his poor hitting since returning from the disabled list decided to use the juiced bat to see if it would help. Unfortunately for Sammy the bat blew apart on contact and the cork was exposed.

Whatever the case Sammy is not the first, nor will he be the last, to turn to hitting aids of an illegal kind. Nor is Sammy the first, or the last, to seek the winning edge by less than legal means. Pitchers are best known for these practices, so why should hitters refrain?

Even Major League Baseball has been suspected of tampering with the equipment and the playing surface to alter the nature of the game. Raising and lower the mound has been done to change the balance between pitching and hitting. The ball itself has been altered to affect the number of home runs on tap in major league games.

Ground's crews mow or do not mow (the grass) to suit the strengths and weaknesses of the home team. The area in front of home plate is made soft or hard for the same reason. Baselines are tilled in one direction or another to suit the bunting ability of the competitors.

Some of this is legal, some illegal, and some in a gray area of ethical ambiguity. Sammy Sosa's transgression lies somewhere between the illegal and ethically ambiguous depending on what you believe about his actions.

Of more interest in this fiasco has been the media reaction. The night of the event itself ESPN brought in George Will to add his *gravitas* to the proceedings on the midnight edition of "Outside the Lines," no pun intended by ESPN. Will, in a manner generally reserved for a constitutional crisis or a discussion of Bill Clinton's sex life, solemnly pontificated on the events at Wrigley Field and the sacred personage of Sammy Sosa.

Rick Telander, normally a voice of some reason, was all over Sammy Sosa discussing the evenings proceedings in a style usually reserved for Chicago's better known criminal class. At least it can be said of Will that he was willing to withhold judgement until a bit more was known.

On "Baseball Tonight" the initial atmosphere was a bit more relaxed although Rob Dibble was foaming at the mouth before the sun rose on the next morning. Yes, that Rob Dibble!

The coverage of the bat incident moved quickly beyond the sports media. The 24/7 cable channels were on the case quickly, and local news chatterboxes were tut-tutting by evening's end.

The morning shows all headlined the incident and were pleading falsely, "Say It Isn't Sosa!" The Black Sox were once again being evoked in the face of another baseball scandal, if that's what this was. And that must be what it was, as ESPN came in with a two hour special the following afternoon to deal with *l'affaire d'Sosa*.

If there has ever been a minor event that proves there is too much media coverage of everything, this is it. The rush to judgement and hyperbole has been beyond belief. Some were suggesting that Sosa should be banned from baseball for life, some questioned his legitimacy as a home run hitter, some wanted to trash him immediately as a role model as if cork in one bat trumped all he has done for the people of the Dominican.

Inevitably there have been charges from players, including non-Latin players, that what is operating here is an anti-Latin bias. Others have suggested that this is another example of the white media going after black players. Although I wouldn't be surprised if the anti-Latin bias is playing a role with some, I find all this more a function

of the media madness that has infected American life at this point in history.

As for charges of racial and Latin bias I find the emergence of these charges more alarming than this case itself. If in fact a large percentage of Latin players share Pedro Martinez's views, or if a significant portion of black players share the views expressed by Gary Sheffield, then major league baseball has a very serious problem in the clubhouses. Alienation of players to this degree is not healthy for the players, the teams, or the sport.

Finally returning to Sammy Sosa. After he serves his suspension, and one he deserves whatever its length, I expect that he will return to being Sammy Sosa, unless of course the decline in his batting skills turns out to be permanent. As for me I look for a return of the real Sammy Sosa and happier days at Wrigley Field, at least until the Cubs fade from this year's pennant race.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't need to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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